

Multi-level Assessments for Better Targeting of the Poor: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how various poverty assessment modalities serve to strengthen the governance capacities necessary to target the poor. Large-scale surveys and qualitative, 'bottom-up' assessments both have shortcomings in this regard. A 'multi-level' synthesis would in theory link a unified indicator framework (such as the Millennium Development Goals) to localized situation assessments and facilitate multi-sectoral efforts to target the poor. Case studies of actual efforts to do this from Vietnam and Burma highlight the way in which the governance context of a country must be taken into account when designing such efforts.

Key words: Poverty, evaluation, donors, targeting, governance

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1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, policy makers have had access to increasingly sophisticated poverty measurement techniques, due largely to the creation of standardized databases such as the Living Standard Measurement Surveys. Conventional large-scale surveys, generating standardized and time-specific data, may lead to internationally comparable data and can be useful to monitor progress in reducing poverty according to specified poverty lines. However, they can also contribute to the marginalization of the 'socially excluded' who are unlikely to take part in such national surveys, or to be 'targeted'.

Parallel and partly in response to such shortcomings in large-scale survey design, the same period has witnessed the wide diffusion of qualitative, participatory research methods. These methods have also come under greater scrutiny over the past decade, with the difficulties of meshing the intensive field-level work necessary to generate such findings with local and

national service delivery mechanisms being one of the areas cited by critics. One of the most interesting advances in development practice in the past ten years has been the emergence of various hybrid forms of poverty assessment and the potential these hold to draw on the advantages of both types of methods while mitigating the disadvantages.

This paper explores the potential for such hybrid forms to contribute towards better targeting of poor and marginalized groups. We first examine in greater depth the strengths and weaknesses of two types of poverty assessments which, on their own, have become ‘traditional’, i.e. large-scale surveys and qualitative, localized participatory assessments. We then present a diagnostic framework for examining the link between poverty assessment methods and the requirements of the effective targeting of the poor, by which we understand as any collective action that tends to reduce poverty. We then explore two case country examples of how international donors and governments are attempting to introduce and institutionalize assessment frameworks for particular aspects of poverty, and meeting with varying degrees of success. These case-studies – taken from Vietnam and Burma (Myanmar, as the current regime renamed the country in 1989), with a particular focus on targeting child-related indicators within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – cast light on other similar attempts to make poverty assessments more ‘actionable’ in terms of their effect on collective action to reduce poverty. We then discuss the significance of the governance context and identify some of the necessary institutional conditions and other enabling factors for efforts to strengthen the efficiency between poverty assessments and targeting of the poor.

2. Limitations of survey-based and participatory poverty assessments

Inherent biases in poverty estimates from national-level assessments can occur at various stages, from the initial survey design, the data collection method and the data analysis. Two major sources of biases in poverty indicators and their consequences on the effectiveness of poverty targeting are briefly discussed below. These relate to the sample design and to the choice of quantitative and qualitative indicators.

Firstly, it is customary to define the sample design according to the latest available population census. As a result, there is an inherent bias against newly established households and recent migrants, often composed of younger members earning lower income. Also

excluded are households without fixed housing, such as those living in hotels, hostels, boarding houses or depending entirely on charity. Ethnic minorities, who tend to live in more isolated parts of a country and do not necessarily speak the official language, are also likely to be excluded from such large-scale surveys, for reasons that go beyond sampling design, such as difficulties finding translators and in reaching the household due to poor quality of roads.

Secondly, conventional household questionnaires usually include a wide range of indicators, including health, nutrition, education, housing, employment, consumption, wealth, income and expenditure. Notwithstanding data quality, the heavy reliance on mainly economic indicators does not reflect the importance of the social, cultural and ethnic characteristics and values of the poorest segment of the population. This aspect of poverty is increasingly recognized as a missing component of national-level poverty alleviation strategies (Sen, 1995 and 1999).

Another fundamental bias stems from the established argument that analyzing poverty dynamics solely at the household level results in inappropriate inferences regarding intra-household poverty (Muffels, 2000). An evaluation of the incidence of poverty using household income or expenditure data implicitly assumes, for example, that all members of the household are in the same income or expenditure level. However, most large-scale household surveys are rarely significant at the disaggregated intra-household level. This crucial bias dramatically reduces the possibility of targeting poverty for women and children (Brassard, 2005; Thomas *et al.* 1998).

Partly in response to these perceived shortcomings, the 1980s witnessed an upsurge in interest in and experimentation with participatory poverty assessment methods (Chambers, 1997; Johnson and Mayoux, 1998). These methods were based on a broader conception of poverty as contingent, multidimensional and inherently variable between localities. This implied the recognition of the non-material and intangible dimensions of poverty which have a direct impact on the levels of vulnerability faced by the poor, including self-esteem, autonomy, access to information and especially *participation*, lack of which is a *sine qua non* of social exclusion.

Participatory approaches evolved very quickly. Rapid rural appraisal (RRA), initially developed by academics in the late 1970s, soon became widely used by aid agencies and university researchers. Within ten years, RRA was commonly implemented in various fields, including agriculture, health, credit programmes and natural resource management.

Following up on RRA, various NGOs began using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) to develop community action plans. These have been characterized as ‘methods to enable rural people to share, enhance, and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan, to act [...] to monitor and evaluate’ (Chambers, 1997:104). As opposed to RRA, which were administered by outsiders and applied innovative methods for data collection using local people’s *knowledge*, PRA methods were implemented using local people’s *capabilities*, with the goal of obtaining sustainable local action and institutions.

What view of pro-poor targeting is implied by this increasingly influential perspective on poverty? If poverty is inherently localized and the causes of poverty vary between localities, it would appear highly relevant to develop actions against poverty that are locally specific. Therefore the diagnosis of poverty and the measures necessary to target poverty should on this view themselves be localized. Indeed, one of the key critiques of systems characterized by bureaucratic centralization is that their standardized poverty measures often prevent the poor from being identified in a meaningful ways (Korten, 1990).

While support for participatory methods was near universal in theory by the end of the decade, key problems remained and some began to reassess the feasible scope for applying such methods. First, the information generated from participatory assessments does not automatically lend itself for an easy integration into a national framework for poverty alleviation. Some of their limitations inevitably relate to their lack of comparability; because there is no overall definition of poverty and methods vary, it is difficult to use the methods to meaningfully compare poverty levels across jurisdictions. Second, the methods are extremely difficult to apply on a large scale and in government bureaucracies (outside of donor-assisted programs), for several reasons. They demand critically for their success on skilled facilitators, growing shorter in supply in proportion to the number of localities to be trained. Linking the results of participatory assessments into bureaucratic planning systems on a large scale has generated logistical nightmares, a well-known “problem of 10,000 plans” at the local level needing somehow to be integrated within the annual intergovernmental planning and budgeting cycle of donors and governments (UNCDF, 1999). And participatory methods can

become quite expensive, implying a higher proportion of investment going to facilitate planning than is acceptable for many donors and (particularly) governments. Finally, the very success of the participation agenda, and of PRA methods within that agenda, led to such a rapid expansion of its use that the quality of implementation became questionable in many cases. Poor quality practice has become quite widespread as agencies ‘go through the motions’ of participatory, bottom-up assessments, but then do little with the findings, falling back on other methods of resource allocation more amenable to donor control and perceptions of administrative efficiency.

3. ‘Actionable’ Poverty Assessments: A Conceptual Framework

Both large-scale, conventional surveys and qualitative, localized approaches to poverty assessments thus have important conceptual and/or practical problems that may result in the poor not being appropriately targeted for assistance. To assess more precisely how poverty assessments can facilitate meaningful pro-poor action, a framework is needed that links the poverty assessment functions with the practical requirements for targeting the poor. In what follows, we first define what we mean by targeting and the capacities – informational and otherwise – necessary for it to happen, and then examine in more detail specific components of an assessment-targeting linkage.

Better targeting of the poor is defined in our paper as the goal, but what does that mean? Broadly speaking, we take targeting to imply any collective action by governments, civil society organizations and communities that disproportionately benefits relatively poor or vulnerable groups. We may distinguish between two types of pro-poor action: direct and indirect. Direct action refers to the case where poor groups within an area, or relatively poor geographical areas, are singled out for particular remedial attention, for instance through any means-tested benefit or through a block grant targeted to ‘poor’ localities. Action is indirect, in contrast, when the broad effect of the policy disproportionately benefits the poor although its delivery does not *explicitly* single out the poor for special attention. In theory, this may occur as an explicit objective of the policy, but it need not; reducing inflation may not be billed as a pro-poor policy, by policy makers, even though it may plausibly benefit the poor more than the rich. Figure 1 captures the proposed dichotomies.

[Figure 1 here]

What is needed for targeting in the senses noted above to occur? By emphasizing pro-poor *action*, targeting in our definition and scope requires two kinds of capacities. The first is pro-poor *governance capacities*. A more comprehensive examination of governance lies well beyond this paper (see Kaufmann *et al*, 2005), but simplifying from the literature and earlier work (Fritzen, 2000), we posit three categories of influences: political will, participatory, decentralized governance and bureaucratic coordination. *Political will* – in which political benefits for pro-poor action are perceived and leadership is employed to achieve pro-poor goals – is necessary to generate public resources (international and national) necessary for poverty reduction and to sustain continuity of public action over time (since poverty reduction is necessarily a long term effort). *Participatory, decentralized governance* refers to the ability to identify the poor locally (as this is by definition impossible at upper levels, given an acceptance of the multi-dimensionality of poverty) and to ensure the poor are actually targeted for local action. *Bureaucratic coordination* is the attempt to facilitate *joint* action by multiple stakeholders across levels of government, including systems for channeling resources available in a country in a differentiated way to where they are needed to reduce poverty.

Alongside these general governance capacities are specific *assessment functions* or capacities that serve to strengthen (or not) the governance capacities just mentioned, depending on how they are employed. The three categories here are steering, localization and program integration. *Steering* is the facilitation of national- or local-level goal setting in poverty-related areas by providing benchmarks with which to compare and demonstrate progress over time. Steering facilitates political will by strengthening the potential political benefits of action to reduce poverty. It involves some form of goal-setting with clear links to social indicators, and some means for monitoring and evaluation of progress towards these goals. *Localization* refers to the ability to make nationally recognized goals and knowledge about poverty adaptable enough to be locally useful in generating and tapping into local knowledge about who to target, why and how. It facilitates the participation of multiple partnerships to take locally appropriate action to reduce poverty. The informational functions implied in localization are locally relevant situation analysis and implementation modalities. Finally, *integrated programming* refers to the way planning frameworks guide resource allocation

across multiple levels of government. Table 1 summarizes these governance capacities and assessment functions underlying pro-poor targeting.

[Table 1 here]

We can further identify five components or informational needs within the poverty assessment system. *Situation analysis* is a function that enables all those involved in directing local action to develop a clear picture of poverty in a specified area, including what is causing it and how it is changing. *Goal setting* lays out some specifiable relationship between the current and future state linked in some way to specific indicators that have been developed. *Program planning / budgeting* refers to linkages between specific programs or policies aimed at reaching goals, on the one hand, to resources that are mobilized from international, national, local government or community resources, on the other.

Implementation strategies involve the formulation of approaches to overcome policy-implementation gaps and adverse conditions, and for mobilizing the bureaucracy in coordinated service delivery. Finally, *monitoring and evaluation* represents learning across all of these areas: the ability to update the situation analysis, track goal achievement or program inputs (the latter a quasi-audit function) and assess causes for policy-implementation gaps so that appropriate changes in program strategy may be effected.

Revisiting the two styles of poverty assessment discussed earlier (conventional surveys and participatory methods), it is evident that these can be seen as characteristic of centralized and decentralized systems of assessment, respectively. Poverty assessment systems that are ‘overly’ centralized or decentralized may have significant lacunae from the perspective of poverty targeting. Centralized systems place emphasis on control over service delivery and systems of control, while decentralized assessment systems (typically financed in the context of NGO projects) build on strong community participation but lack clear linkages to the resources from the bureaucracy (in terms of human resources or expertise) that would make donor support more sustainable.

Table 2 presents these considerations, and adds a third row for a potential synthesis of the two, one representing something of an ideal against which to measure the hybrid forms presented in the case studies to follow. A ‘multi-level’ approach would in theory be one with a well-defined set of goals that are concretized for particular local governments. Thus, for

instance, its ‘steering’ system would be served by a situation analysis, goal setting and monitoring that were both linked to a national framework and locally appropriate and flexible. A multi-level approach would have systems that serve to link total resource availability to the accomplishment of the goals set at various levels, and would thus require a system of intergovernmental coordination.

[Table 2 here]

In summary, using the above framework we should be able to characterize the capacities present in a given governance system for pro-poor targeting to occur. Our approach is primarily descriptive – i.e. it outlines a set of requirements for the types of assessment that are posited to facilitate pro-poor targeting in any setting. But it is also prescriptive in that ‘overly’ centralized and decentralized approaches alone are assumed to be insufficient to accomplish meaningful targeting. But is the ‘synthesis’ just described in outline form feasible in developing countries, given their often severe resource and capacity constraints? And are there any examples of such a synthesis in practice? We now turn to these questions.

4. Towards a Multi-Level Synthesis: Case Studies From Vietnam and Burma

There are in fact various approaches that are moving in the direction of the ‘multi-level synthesis’. Processes such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) of the World Bank and the focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) provide an overarching framework for goal setting, while the public-sectors of many countries are rapidly decentralizing, providing the opportunity (in theory) for increased local participation and moving responsibility for poverty assessment and targeting downwards in the chain of intergovernmental relations. Linking PPAs with the PRSP process have now become part of the new ‘participatory’ agenda (Robb, 2002; Miller-Adams, 1999) as the approach to civil society and to recognition of the importance of the governance agenda (discussed in the next section) were brought at the forefront of the development strategy in many developing countries. These emerging moves towards a ‘multi-level’ synthesis share several characteristics:

1) Link to the MDGs. The MDGs fulfill several important functions from a poverty targeting point of view. First, they facilitate cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons of countries (and sub national units). Second, they focus scarce time and attention onto important *outcome*-oriented goals, such as reducing poverty levels as benchmarked at a particular time. Third, the MDGs broaden the analysis away from income-based aspects of poverty alone, to include such indicators as child survival (infant, child and maternal mortality rates) and educational attainment. Fourth, they in theory have a clear link to resource mobilization. Their formulation is intended to guide resource allocation by donors and to potentially mobilize greater overall levels of ODA funding, by emphasizing goals that the international community should commit to reaching.

2) Prominent donor role. Donors – particularly multilateral, but also including some prominent international NGOs – play a key role in the emerging synthesis. They bring external expertise, and advocate strongly for involving civil society groups systematically in the poverty assessment. Although the synthesis cannot usefully be seen as a form of conditionality, since the linkage between goal achievement and external support is in practice weak, donors offer the potential for assisting goal achievement through pilot projects and enhanced aggregate funding to countries demonstrating strong ‘commitment’ towards the MDGs.

3) Localization of goal framework. An important feature of current moves towards a synthesis is the way global or national frameworks are increasingly being tailored to local government units. Such localization enhances the relevance of the goal framework to localities and enhances the potential for facilitating local action, and thus fits well with the concepts of targeting developed above. Another practical reason underlying this trend is the growing decentralization of the public sector in many countries in the region, extending in strong or weak forms to even many authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam (World Bank, 2005 and Fritzen, 2002). A purely national-level goal framework will not be particularly relevant in countries – such as Uganda, Indonesia and the Philippines – where the authority for basic services has been devolved to local governments. Where these are large and geographically or social diverse countries, the need for localization is even more apparent, since national goals will not be relevant as a yardstick to measure progress anywhere except a hypothetically ‘average’ district.

We now turn to two case studies of a donor-initiated attempt to introduce poverty assessments that are, according to the above view, ‘multi-level’ or ‘synthetic’. This paper argues that the context of governance has an important impact on the ability to pursue multi-level poverty assessments. To explore this relationship, we examine the efforts of one donor – the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) – attempting to introduce child rights-based poverty assessments linked to the MDGs in two distinct governance settings, Vietnam and Burma. These cases can shed light on similar approaches being applied in many country settings, such as the PRSP process. The cases were developed from extensive fieldwork carried out by one of us in both countries from 1999 to 2003 (Fritzen 2000 and 2003; see also Eberhardt, 2003). We begin by providing some background on the two countries.

Vietnam and Burma: Contrasting Authoritarian Styles

Vietnam and Burma represent diverse governance contexts. Political power is not competitively contested in either country. Vietnam, reunified in 1975 after decades of war, is ruled by the Communist Party and Burma by a military junta which took over in the aftermath of elections in 1989 which the opposition National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, had won. Both countries suffered from decades of economic mismanagement under a socialist ideology and are now committed (in theory) to market-oriented systems. But the governance similarities end there. Vietnam is, despite many challenges and constraints, rapidly developing economically, while Burma is falling ever further behind other Southeast Asian countries.

Vietnam has a generally favorable policy framework for poverty reduction and has experienced, over the past twenty years, rates of economic growth and poverty reduction among the highest in the world. At the same time, economic reforms have also brought significant dislocations. Inequality – particularly urban-rural and interregional – has grown sharply over this period, as differently endowed regions and households respond to the opportunities of the new economic system (Fritzen and Brassard, 2005). Concerns over institutional quality have also been pronounced. Some observers find the government’s commitment to the structural reforms necessary to recover high growth rates to be flagging (Riedel and Turley, 1999). Perceptions of corruption in officialdom, already ranked among

the highest in the world, are on a steady upward trend. Despite this, disbursements of official development aid to Vietnam have increased dramatically over the last ten years, from US\$ 413 million in 1993 to over two billion in 2004.

Burma (renamed to Myanmar by the regime in 1989) is one of the great developmental tragedies of Southeast Asia (Steinberg, 2002). Entering its fifth decade of independence, the country is suffering from massive corruption, political repression, sustained economic and environmental decline, chronic food insecurity and stagnation in many social indicators. The government itself evinces very low capacity to deliver services or commitment to the social sectors, and many social indicators have continued to deteriorate at an alarmingly fast pace in the past 15 years (ADB, 2001).

National Program of Action (NPA) Decentralization in Vietnam

One reform attempting to link MDGs to local level targeting efforts via decentralized governance – hence an attempt, according to our framework, to promote an “actionable poverty assessments” was particularly notable over the 1990s in Vietnam. This is the decentralization of Vietnam’s National Program of Action for Children (NPA) to all provinces, and many districts and communes, throughout the country beginning in 1993, together with the decentralization of the newly established (1991) Vietnam Ministerial Committee for the Protection and Care of Children (CPCC) to oversee the implementation of the Programs of Action (PA).

The NPA is a multi-sectoral planning framework. It contains a situation analysis, time-based goals, implementation targets, and a presentation of resource requirements for most basic social services, such as primary health care and basic education. National Program of Action formulation in 1991 followed Vietnam’s ratification (first among Asian nations) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, one paragraph of which specifies that countries will make efforts to concretize Convention commitments through the formulation of specific programs at national and, if possible, sub national levels of government. The NPA was formulated against concerns over the social impacts of the rapid economic and public-sector reform in Vietnam referred to earlier. UNICEF provided considerable technical support to the creation of the NPA in Vietnam.

Within a year of its adoption, the government decided to decentralize the NPA to all 53 provinces (completed by 1994), and later (completed by 1999), to all – some 550 – districts throughout the country. ‘Decentralization’ in this context meant the creation of separate provincial, district and commune Programs of Action, mirroring the structure of the National Program of Action while providing for more autonomous local goal setting, better community participation and enhanced intersectoral coordination. It also refers to the establishment of local intersectoral bodies to implement the Programs. This was a sweeping decision that UNICEF was not driving; there was thus high national ‘ownership’ of the NPA and its decentralization, despite UNICEF’s initiating role.

What impacts did the adoption and decentralization of the PAs bring in their wake? Were these programs ‘on paper’ only? To assess the effect of the assessment system on targeting of the poor, we return to the theoretical framework and examine the reform’s impact on the three sets of capacities described there, based on extensive fieldwork carried out in several provinces in 1999 (Fritzen, 2000).

The first is the “steering” function as this impacts on political will. Local government executives of the “People’s Committees” often emphasized that their awareness of the ‘state of children’ at the local level improved dramatically due to the Program of Action framework and the work of the intersectoral CPCC. “The CPCC has become the eyes and the ears of the administration regarding children,” claimed one (Fritzen, 2000:200). Programs of Action in many areas were passed by formal legislation by the legislative People’s Councils of localities, and key provisions publicized via billboards, radio shows or leaflets. A few better-off localities, such as Hochiminh City and Thai Binh province, allocated matching grants to complement local resource mobilization from communities to fund PA-designated high profile projects in localities. In this way, the committee structure could have an impact in several areas, from political to social and even fiscal mobilization.

The second assessment function is “localization”, relying on and facilitating decentralized local action to target the poor. Local Programs of Action were quite successful in many areas in marrying a unified planning and goal-setting / monitoring framework to local details. All reports followed a similar format, linking a situation analysis to specific outcome and program goals to an implementation and monitoring framework. But in those provinces that

enthusiastically institutionalized the NPAs, there was also significant local detail as well. This went beyond descriptions of local variations in NPA-related indicators to include a qualitative assessment of implementation barriers and differential performance of local governments.

The final component of our conceptual framework is “integrated programming”, serving bureaucratic coordination, i.e. the allocation of human and financial resources to specific programs supporting local poverty reduction efforts. In the better-performing areas, there was clear evidence that the intersectoral planning documents were utilized by the associated intersectoral coordinating committees to tackle problems in new ways for vulnerable groups. For instance, in Hochiminh City, a ward PA and its CPCC devoted substantial attention and resources towards a priority problem within the commune borders – taking care of the social needs of a large (over 300) group of children who regularly sifted through the garbage at the large municipal dump site. A well-developed situation analysis of the problem faced by the children and their families was followed by a detailed delineation of specific efforts that the health and education line agencies, as well as various mass organizations, would take to address the issue. Similar examples were found in other provinces, where the focus was on addressing the causes of higher-than expected drop out rate (Thai Binh province) or an unusually high number of children drowning in a coastal area (Quang Ngai province).

Despite these positive examples of pro-poor targeting that were facilitated by the new assessment framework of the local Programs of Action, several fundamental problems and difficulties were encountered and described in detail in previous work (Fritzen, 2000). One was differential performance across local governments. An astounding degree of variation in reform implementation was noted across provinces in Vietnam. The examples above were characteristic of perhaps the best-performing quarter of local governments. They were able to not only create local Programs of Action as per central directives, but to invest substantial local resources in their development and in the administrative integration of the newly established committees. In perhaps another third of localities, institutionalization of the PA process was minimal; officials merely complied with central directions in this regard, but the planning and monitoring frameworks were not, apparently, utilized in a meaningful way.

In fact, since the PAs were disseminated with no additional funding source forthcoming, this is not surprising. Decentralizing planning systems without also decentralizing control over resources is a classic problem in developing countries (Manor, 1999). In the overall context of Vietnam's fiscal decentralization program, provinces with increasing own-level resources found it expedient to institutionalize the PA framework, since it helped them to rationalize social sector management. Those provinces still hamstrung by a near complete absence of control over their discretionary revenues, in contrast, had little incentive to plan more proactively or to 'target' the poor with resources not under their own control.

In addition, the central government through the period of the NPA decentralization reforms played a passive rather than enabling role. The overall legal and administrative framework for the reforms remained weak, with insufficiently detailed and at times contradictory guidelines on the planning process. No significant capacity building assistance was provided to the poorer provinces where the reforms were not working well.

The Case of Burma

With a budget of some US\$13 million per year for this country of 50 million inhabitants, slightly higher in proportion to population than Vietnam, UNICEF is currently the largest donor supporting basic social services in Burma, due to the absence of the Bretton Woods institutions and the ongoing reluctance of the bilateral donors to resume aid to a regime considered highly repressive. Against a near crisis setting of social sector decline described earlier, UNICEF's assistance to Burma has focused on targeting selected local governments with a package of essential services. Its "Area-Focused Township (AFT)" approach involves the systematic identification of approximately the poorest 20% of townships (equivalent to Vietnam's districts) in the country for a range of support in education, health, sanitation and safe water and anti-HIV interventions (Fritzen, 2003; Eberhardt, 2003). The program is coordinated on the government's side by the General Administration Department, considered to be the core of the country's non-military civil service, and assistance is targeted directly onto the township level authorities and below. The lack of channeling of assistance directly through the central level authorities is due to a sensitive balancing act that UNICEF authorities must play between maintaining functional relationships with the government in

order to carry out its work in basic needs and not offending various international stakeholders of UNICEF that are critical of it cooperating with a deeply unpopular regime.

In working in this very difficult setting, UNICEF put considerable effort into the development of a comprehensive baseline survey including standard poverty measures, social indicators and some governance related indicators. The survey covered all townships targeted for UNICEF assistance under the AFT approach as well as four control (non-assisted) townships. Developed jointly by UNICEF officials and a social science think tank in the country, the survey was an examination of indicators relating to the coverage of basic education and health services and the quality of those services. Three methods were employed: *i*) a household survey focusing on utilization of health and education facilities and perceptions of service quality; *ii*) a health and education facility survey to examine in depth the performance along various indicators of community-based health centers and schools; and *iii*) a village and township profile based on secondary data sources. These methods were not particularly participatory, but they incorporated semi-structured components for assessing perceived service quality (and thus did not pre-define all categories). While the methods were not linked to a *national* planning framework, the indicators selected – including child mortality and completion rate for primary education – were conceptually and operationally linked to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and, by extension, to the MDGs.

The baseline assessment system, when coupled with the AFT approach to investing in the poorest townships, can be seen as an innovative way of working within the constraints of a highly adverse governance environment. The extent to which it can help build the three capacities necessary for targeting was restricted but nevertheless meaningful:

1. *'Steering' to build political will.* Building on a national framework for social sector goal setting was for practical reasons not a possibility in Burma, where there is a general social policy vacuum at the central level and local governments have no institutionalized planning process. Burma is an information-poor country; not only are social sector surveys scarce and generally small-scale, but information flows are systematically distorted by the perverse incentives built into decades of central planning (Steinberg, 2002). The baseline survey noted above was intended to provide an advocacy tool for communicating the (generally distressing) state of Burma's social sectors to the authorities and to other interested parties.

In this way the seeds of a more effective system can be sown for the future post-transition period, even if there is, from UNICEF's perspective, 'nobody home' for advocacy messages in the present period.

2. *'Localization'* to facilitate decentralized action. By improving data availability for child related indicators at the local level, the baseline data and AFT approach facilitated local targeting of the poor. While local leaders would feel no particular accountability to villagers themselves for delivering services, the baseline offered the potential quantifiable comparisons of service coverage over time. Subsequent evaluations noted that in light of the baseline data, local officials reported greater pressure from superiors to demonstrate results than they would otherwise (Eberhardt, 2003). Requirements for policy change were less relevant at the local level (in this extremely centralized system) than taking practical steps to improve coordination of services; and to a limited degree this was facilitated by the baseline data.

3. *Integrated programming*. To date UNICEF has found it impossible to do more than modestly adjust programs it has already defined at the central level to local requirements. There is no institutionalized planning process for government at local levels upon which to 'hang' a more integrated planning process. What UNICEF did through the baseline approach coupled with AFT investments was to develop a profile of the causes of vulnerability applicable to groups of women and children without access to essential services. This profile was used to target pre-existing types of assistance more appropriately to address root causes of vulnerability and poverty. By concentrating assistance onto a limited number of areas, the information systems of the AFT approach incrementally strengthened the capacity of local government officials to collect baseline and monitoring information in critical service areas (Eberhardt, 2003).

Discussion

If Vietnam is found to have moderate levels of all three of the capacities we posit to underlie targeting – political will, decentralized governance and bureaucratic coordination – then Burma has an almost extreme lack of any of them. How did this governance context affect UNICEF's ability to promote multi-level poverty assessments? In Vietnam, the generally positive experience suggests considerable potential for a synthesis of centralizing and

localized frameworks. Relatively high country ‘ownership’ of assessment framework, strong links between international, national and local action via a coherent planning framework that allowed localization, and some evidence of actually improved ability to target the poor are all present in the Vietnam case.

But the problems encountered in the Vietnam and Burma cases are also likely to apply more generally to similar efforts, and they point to areas where greater capacity building is necessary to make the multi-level assessment frameworks work. First, the qualitative, participatory aspects of the assessment process (what we have labeled “localization”) proved highly demanding of capacity and supportive institutional environment for participation. This is the same problem experienced by PRA-type methods, but one exacerbated by the hugely greater scope (involving many districts and provinces if not the entire country) of the proposed assessment framework. Certainly in Burma, there is little scope for a genuinely participatory development process at present – at least not working through government channels, as UNICEF is obliged to do because of the scope of its investments. Thus the qualitative aspects of the poverty assessment in that country are contingent on UNICEF’s active involvement, and are in any case of limited scope. In Vietnam, conditions are far better for local participation, but the quality and multidimensionality of the situation analyses of local governments also varied tremendously, and the central government failed to provide concerted capacity building support in this regard.

Second, political commitment to the assessment framework will not be constant over time. It is difficult to predict whether Vietnam’s leadership will continue to use NPA decentralization as one of the key platforms for institutionalized goal setting and tracking of progress in child-related indicators, given that there are many other competing priorities and given the ongoing public sector reforms on the Vietnamese scene. In Burma, there is essentially no solid support behind social sector reform at the central government level, and the baseline system and the AFT approach – while ambitious in attempting to plant seeds for change that may flourish later under more favorable governance conditions – are at present entirely dependent on UNICEF.

Finally, a key constraint on the application of multi-level assessments is that of institutionalizing decentralized governance, on which all three of the requirements for targeting – strengthening political will (at the local level), linking local goals and indicators

to national frameworks, and improving social service delivery systems – depend. Most countries that are currently decentralizing some functions of the public sector around the world have faced the problem of mitigating disparities between local government units in both development outcomes and governance qualities (Manor, 1999). In a decentralizing system, the central government must retain and even strengthen important roles, such as setting and enforcing minimum standards, maintaining a system of fiscal decentralization and providing technical assistance. Burma represents one of the most highly centralizing governance structures in the world, in which local government per se does not exist and intergovernmental relations are on a purely command-and-control basis (Steinberg, 2002). Vietnam is a unitary state with well-developed local government functions and planning processes. Yet there too, a reorientation of central roles to address growing disparities has been slow to develop, in part because of its long history of bureaucratic centralism (Fritzen, 2002).

An examination of the case studies suggests that even in highly adverse environments, such as Burma, moves towards poverty assessments that are facilitative of better targeting are possible. The governance context in Burma at central level context is almost absurdly stacked against meaningful local poverty targeting on a widespread scale. Recognizing this, many donors have refused to work in the country entirely. UNICEF's humanitarian mission compels it to continue to work there, and we have described how incremental steps – improving information systems targeting specific social indicators and encouraging coordination – can have a direct payoff at the local level while making a modest contribution towards longer-term change.

5. Conclusion

Four broad implications emerge from our analysis. First, to better understand the requirements for pro-poor targeting to occur, we must look to the multi-level links between poverty assessment systems and the governance capacities underlying pro-poor action. The MDGs are potentially a powerful instrument for facilitating comparisons and strengthening country political will for development. But this commitment will only translate into effective action when combined with localized strategies of implementation and social mobilization. The effectiveness of poverty assessments relates not just to the question of how these

structure our knowledge of who the poor are and what causes their condition, but also to the way assessment modalities facilitate the mobilization of resources – political, fiscal and social – to take coordinated action to reduce poverty.

A second point is to explore the way governance systems constrain and enable multi-level poverty assessments. The envelope of opportunity for meeting the capacity requirements at different levels (the three criteria of our framework) is strongly dependent on the external governance context of a country. Poverty assessments obviously do not and cannot ‘create’ political will for targeting nor the local operational capacities to actually deliver anti-poverty programs. But they can strengthen the incentives for pro-poor action even in adverse environments.

Third, we need a better understanding of what makes poverty assessments “actionable”. Further research in two areas may be helpful in this regard. One is to extend the basic framework we have developed to other governance contexts. In particular, we have not been able to include case study from a democratizing country, or one with strong, independent civil society organizations. Another area is the donor side of the story. Our analysis suggests the envelope of opportunity to combine different aspects of poverty assessment systems in innovative ways is determined to a large extent by donor capacities – to coordinate with each other and national government and to support decentralized processes.

Figure 1: Typology of Poverty Targeting

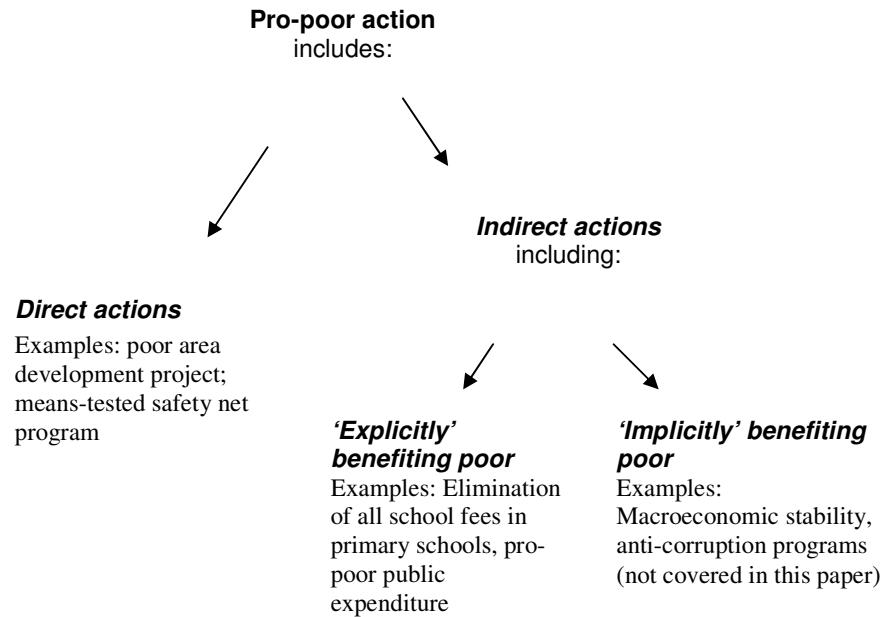


Table 1: Governance and Assessment Capacities for Pro-Poor Targeting

Governance capacities:	Assessment capacities:
Political will	➔ Steering
Decentralized governance	➔ Localization
Bureaucratic coordination	➔ Integrated programming

Table 2: Poverty Assessment and Targeting Capacities by Degree of Centralization

APPROACHES	SITUATION ANALYSIS	GOAL SETTING	PROGRAM PLANNING /BUDGETING	IMPLEMENTATION	MONITORING /EVALUATING
‘Overly Centralized’ (National Level)	<u>Relatively “objective”:</u> Based on large scale standardized surveys including mainly quantitative indicators.	<u>Aggregated goals:</u> Inherent biases due to sampling methodology and restricted choice of indicators	<u>Output-orientation:</u> Bureaucratic resource allocation	<u>Sectoral:</u> Vertical, Non-integrated, lacking coordination	<u>Focus on inputs:</u> Using auditing and technical controls
‘Overly Decentralized’ (Local Level)	<u>Relatively “subjective”:</u> Based on participatory appraisals including mainly qualitative indicators	<u>Few local goals:</u> Few specific or measurable goals; only local goals	<u>Donor-dependent:</u> Lack of local financial resources and institutional weight	<u>Bottom-up:</u> Community participation; often weak links to technical agencies	<u>Local project evaluation:</u> Assessment along multiple (often qualitative) indicators
Towards a multi-level synthesis	<u>Using mixed indicators:</u> Both qualitative and quantitative indicators are used	<u>Outcome-oriented:</u> Local ownership and political will through goals “negotiated”	<u>Performance-oriented:</u> Central transfers linked to local accountability, plus local mobilization	<u>Coordinated:</u> Partnership between state-private-civil society tapping into each entity’s strengths (co-production)	<u>Adaptive:</u> Focus on implementation gaps and needed adjustments in strategy to reach goals

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